DISCIPLINED BODIES: THE MAGDALENE SPECTACLE IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH CULTURAL TEXTS*

Auxiliadora Pérez Vides
Universidad de Huelva

Abstract

This article explores women's corporeal repression in Ireland's Magdalene laundries as represented in Marita Conlon-McKenna's novel *The Magdalen* (1999) and Aisling Walsh's film *Sinners* (2002). Women were sent to those institutions, which operated in Ireland until the mid 1990s under the rule of several religious orders, for a variety of reasons: showing dissolute manners, becoming pregnant out of wedlock, being victims of rape, having a mental disability or simply extremely good looks, among others. To expiate their "sins", the inmates suffered various schemes of corporal mortification that revealed an intricate ethos of national, religious and gender elements. My contention is that the two texts describe how the different assaults upon the Magdalenes' corporeality entailed the corruption of a system that exploited their bodies as the apparatus of expiation of wider social fears and bigoted understandings of female virtue and justice.

Keywords: magdalene laundries, Ireland, women's disciplination, sexual repression.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la represión corporal de las mujeres en las «Lavanderías de la Magdalena» en Irlanda y su representación en la novela *The Magdalen* (1999) de Marita Conlon-McKenna y la película *Sinners* (2002) de Aisling Walsh. Los motivos por los que se encerraban a las mujeres en estos centros, que funcionaron hasta mediados de los años 1990 bajo la dirección de varias órdenes religiosas, incluían el haber mostrado comportamientos lascivos, quedarse embarazadas fuera del matrimonio, haber sido violadas, tener una discapacidad mental, ser extremadamente atractivas, entre otros. Para expiar sus «pecados», las reclusas eran sometidas a distintos métodos de mortificación que revelan una complejidad de elementos nacionales, religiosos y de género. Intentaré probar como los dos textos describen que la agresión a la corporeidad de las Magdalenas deja ver la corrupción de un sistema que se dedicaba a explotar los cuerpos de las mujeres, convertidas en instrumentos de expiación de temores sociales más genéricos y de dudosas interpretaciones de la justicia.

Palabras clave: lavanderías de la Magdalena, Irlanda, adoctrinamiento de mujeres, represión sexual.

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In the Gloucester Street laundry perhaps they can't speak
In the graveyard of Glasnevin there's no sound
but history is pregnant and the truth is pushing out
and there's no virtue left in silence any more.

Maighread Medbh, "The Price that Love Denied"

1. INTRODUCTION

In her landmark work *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex,* Judith Butler proposes a materialist approach to corporeality, which is entwined in the social regulatory practices that have traditionally controlled and demarcated the body. For her, "what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect" (2). In this sense, Butler calls for "a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (9). Similarly, in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz underscores the material dimension of corporeality, also drawing attention to how social and historical variations articulate bodily identity in both subjective and physical terms: "What are regarded as purely fixed and unchangeable elements of facticity, biologically given factors, are amenable to wide historical vicissitudes and transformations" (190). Following Butler and Grosz's lines of reasoning, this article concentrates on the particular manifestation of the culture-body dialectic that has characterised Ireland for nearly a century. Since the early years of the foundation of the State, the Irish national discourse has produced a complex politics of corporeality by which ideologically, the female imaginary has served to articulate the abstract concept of the nation, but at the same time, the bodies of everyday women have been repeatedly controlled by the agents of power. For Angela K. Martin, in Ireland "[the] discursive correspondence between the nation-state and gendered bodies materially mediates the ways in which feminine bodies are constructed, disciplined and experienced" (66). In other words, women have been mechanisms of the nation through which Irish culture has been acted; yet, the expression of their corporeality outside the codified formulations has appeared as subversive and in need of restraint.

It is commonly argued by contemporary critics and scholars that the repression of the female body became one of the major artefacts of the Irish social ethos resulting from the process of decolonisation from Britain (Herr 1990; Hug 1999; Ferriter 2005 and 2009). Simultaneously, a double standard pervaded the Irish postcolonial milieu of the 1920s onwards whereby any form of sexual transgression

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only ostracised women, while male culpability was generally overlooked. Throughout the twentieth century, the Catholic Church and the State of Ireland sustained this gendered-biased notion of discipline. In their common project of national identity formation, both institutions based their defence of the notion of "Irishness" on a religion-centred normative framework and a system of gender coding that overtly hindered women's rights. A widespread obsession with sexual immorality, which jeopardised the pillars of a Catholic and principled nation, led to a number of restraining policies that would set the basis for the official approach to what was deemed as moral degeneration. As a consequence of this ideological framework, the Irish Free State's extensive response to various groups of problem women and children rested on their removal from public view, with their institutionalisation in prison-like centres that spread throughout the island, thus giving rise to what James Smith calls "the nation's architecture of containment" (2004; 2007). For that purpose, a network of "homes", conceived as spaces of detention and chastisement, gradually consolidated their "moral power" by the mid-century. There, offences and misbehaviour, predominantly of a sexual kind, could be covered and remedied, bearing witness to the preoccupation with family stigmatisation and most acutely, further depravation of the "fallen" individuals. Essentially interdependent in many cases, these institutions included the so-called Magdalene laundries as well as "mother and baby homes, county homes, industrial and reformatory schools and insane asylums" (Smith 2007: 42). However, what seems striking is that although they were chiefly operated by religious congregations, who allegedly contributed to the social provision and moral teaching of the interns, a confinement and totalitarian regime permeated them, indicating the role of censure, secrecy and retribution in what arguably was a microcosm of the social imaginary of newly independent Ireland.[1]

2. THE INSTITUTIONALISED BODY: THE MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES

In this article I explore the disciplinary order inside Ireland's Magdalene laundries, with a particular focus on the terms and effects of the corporeal repression carried out upon the inmates. Run by Catholic sisterhoods like the Sisters of Mercy or the Good Shepherd Sisters —the dominant one—, the laundries figured as penitentiary places for "fallen women", who remained incarcerated and ostra-

[1] Although this chapter focuses on representations of twentieth-century Magdalene homes, I should point out here that these institutions existed for much longer on the island and that they were modeled on the Victorian Magdalene Hospitals, which did rescue work for prostitutes. The first Magdalene Asylum, opened in Dublin in 1767, accepted only Protestant women offenders and it had a purely reformative philosophy. However, when by the mid nineteenth century Catholic Asylums began to proliferate, they gradually became more corrective, as they admitted other types of "fallen women". For an extensive analysis of these early institutions and their development up to the twentieth century, see Finnegan (2001), Luddy (2002) and McCarthy (2010).

cised usually for life. As Maria Luddy notes, "[r]eferrals to Catholic-run Magdalen asylums in the twentieth century came from religious, either priests or nuns, family members, the police or employers" (737). The recurrent motives for consignment ranged from showing dissolute manners or becoming pregnant out of wedlock, to even being victims of rape, having a mental disability or extremely good looks and consequently, according to the strict morals of fundamentalist Catholicism, suspected of tempting men and provoking sexual misconduct, among others. In clear reference to Mary Magdalene, the biblical sinner who redeemed herself, the inmates were addressed as "magdalenes", "maggies", "penitents" or even "children", with their real names also transformed into more saintly and often bizarre ones. Their daily penitence consisted of a scarce diet, hard laundry work, constant prayer, silence and very little recreation (Ferriter 2005: 538), a regimen articulated around the expectation that they had to go through physical and emotional pain in order to expiate their "fall". On this account, the inmates also suffered various schemes of corporal mortification, in a perverse exercise of moral rectification based on a prejudiced interpretation of religious authority, as will be described below. Indeed, it is this atrocious mode of imposed atonement that I am particularly interested in highlighting in this article, insofar as it comprises an intricate ethos of national, religious and gender elements that must be brought to the fore. My contention is that the different assaults upon the Magdalenes' corporeality entailed the corruption of a social system that, albeit founded on mercy and religious teaching, simply exploited their bodies as the apparatus of expiation of wider social fears and bigoted understandings of female virtue and social justice.

An important fact to be considered in this contextual analysis of the Magdalene laundries is that although they propagated throughout the island and continued in operation until the 1990s, the greater part of the Irish population decided to ignore the existence of such places and what was happening in them. As Smith points out, "[n]o one sought to understand how these institutions actually operated; that religious congregations were in control was enough to excuse official inquiry, inspection or regulation" (2007: 47). For that reason, this chapter of Ireland's recent history remained deliberately absent from public discussion and broadly unknown (O'Toole 2003). In Luddy's words, "[b]oth the Catholic public and the religious communities colluded in removing these 'shameful objects' from public view" (737). However, this rule of silence began to be questioned in the last decade of the twentieth century, [2] when a number of survivors, scholars, activists and artists gradually brought to light the incarceration of young women inside these

[2] The revelations about the laundries coincided with the airing of other Church-related scandals, the publication of several studies and the launch of campaigns about the recurrent institutional abuse of children in the so-called Industrial Schools, also managed by Catholic orders. The different committees established to investigate these events led to the Ryan Report, which was released in 2009 and proved the Irish State's involvement in such a system. For a detailed description of these episodes, see Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999) and O'Malley (2005).

institutions.[3] Particularly gripping has been the representation of this repression through powerful media like the visual arts and literature, as they depict in rather unsettling ways the brutality that the Irish magdalenes experienced. By and large, they problematise the mutual benefit of Church and State in perpetuating this system, raising general awareness not only about the everyday life within the laundries, but also the complicit social ethos that had sustained them. Therefore, an early period of revelation on a national and international scale progressively developed into a sharper stage of social confrontation, focussed on notions of responsibility, memory and reparation.[4] Significantly, this course of events at the public level can be said to have an analogue in the internal organisation of many cultural productions about the magdalenes, which I will draw on as well for the construction of my analysis in this chapter. Hence, the productions to be discussed below emphasise in similar ways how the magdalene body was internalised as the direct source of sin, the subsequent object of punishment and then, echoing the discussion that was taking place in society, it became the focus of spectacle that would make up for the rule of silence over this strand of female corporeal tyranny.

3. REPRESENTING THE MAGDALENE BODY: FROM REPRESSION TO EXPRESSION

Among the broad spectrum of works that paved the way for the artistic representation of the Magdalene experience, I concentrate on Marita Conlon-McKenna's novel *The Magdalen* (1999) and Aisling Walsh's film *Sinners* (2002). Both texts illustrate the brutal handling of female corporeality when Irish women transcended the female bodily imperative, particularly having pre-marital sex and getting pregnant out of wedlock. Set in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively, they reveal at the outset the inflexible moral imaginary that prevailed in Irish rural communities

[3] To name but a few: Patricia Burke Brogan's plays *Eclipsed* (1994) and *Stained Glass at Samhain* (2003), Steve Humphries' documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998), June Goulding's memoir *The Light in the Window* (1998), Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's Magdalene poems in the collection *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* (2001), Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and Mannix Flynn's art installation "Call Me by My Name" (2004). Of crucial importance was also the creation of advocacy groups such as Justice for Magdalenes (www.magdalenelaundries.com) and Magdalene Survivors Together, which supported survivors and their families in their claim for a formal State apology for the atrocities committed against the Magdalenes in the laundries and the establishment of a system of redress.

[4] Most recent products about the Magdalene laundries are characterised by a more direct appeal to the everyday public for their ongoing complicity in the perpetuation of this system. They include live durational performances like Amanda Coogan's "Yellow" (2008), Áine Phillips' "Redress" (2010) and "Emotional Labour" (2012), Helena Walsh's "Invisible Stains" (2010), the documentary "The Forgotten Maggies" (2009) by Steven O'Riordan, the site-specific performance *Laundry* (2011) by Louise Lowe, the internationally acclaimed film *Philomena* (2013), directed by Stephen Frears and based on the book *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* (2009) by Martin Sixsmith, and the art installation "Forsaken" (2014) by Mannix Flynn and Maedhbh Mc Mahon.

at that time. Such context is evident through most of the first part of *The Magdalen*, in which the protagonist, Esther Doyle, suffers the consequences of falling in love with a mysterious young man, Connor, who despises her when she announces her pregnancy. Shame and humiliation are Esther's family's reaction towards her fall, while her innocence and vulnerability contrasts with Connor's exculpation. That her body denotes sin and carnal desire can be grasped not only by the names she is immediately called —"slut", "dirty little tramp" and "a hussy of a daughter" (177) — but also by the eldest brother's interpretation of the events: "You couldn't wait for it, like the rest of the decent girls in the parish [...] couldn't keep those legs of yours closed" (177). It is this "saturation with sexuality", to use Michel Foucault's well-known argument about the premises upon which those in positions of knowledge and power have traditionally founded their regulation of female bodies (*The History of Sexuality*: 104), that sets in motion the Magdalene machinery for Esther. Thus, to avoid "the gossip and scandal she would cause" (178), her family rely on the advice of the parish priest, who recommends the Dublin asylum of the Sisters of the Holy Saints, as well as on the support of a sympathetic aunt, who travels with Esther to her new "home". There the girl meets other Maggies, known as Tina, Rita, Mary and Maura, who were confined to the institution for different reasons. The oldest, Detta, had been an intern for fifty years, having nowhere to go back to after her family scorned her for getting pregnant by a Royal Navy sailor. The case of Tina is particularly noticeable too, considering that she was institutionalised when carrying her own father's baby, ultimately stillborn, to whom due to complications she gives birth in a nearby hospital. The unfolding of this incest plot stands out against the common belief among the community and the customers of the laundry that "they're all just sluts and prostitutes, God help them!" (234). Likewise, it reveals not only Conlon-McKenna's insistence on social secrecy but also her adamant critique of the gender polarity when it comes to the violation of the rules of sexual behaviour.

The representation of female corporeal transgression also inaugurates *Sinners,* which tells the story of Anne Marie, an orphan girl from the countryside who is committed by her aunt and a priest after an incestuous impregnation by her own brother, Eamon. Soon after her confinement, Anne Marie's hair is cut, she is renamed Theresa and solemnly initiated by the Mother superior into the philosophy of the laundry: "You may be a sinner. You may have contravened the laws of God and society. But here you can do penance for your sins. You can earn, as Mary Magdalene did, the forgiveness of our Blessed Lord. So remember my dear, our Heaven's sent mission is to return you to the loving arms of our Lord Jesus Christ". As depicted in different moments of the film, this judgement contrasts with the patriarchal protection of Eamon, who remains unpunished throughout. The audience is constantly made aware of society's double standards, probably more explicitly than in the novel but in an equally thought-provoking manner. In this vein, the director's critical position in this poignant aspect of Magdalene institutionalisation illustrates how Finnegan has understood this polarity: "The fact that men were never punished for their part in these women's 'downfall' is a major cause for condemnation. Even more iniquitous is the fact that any woman held in such a place against her will (whether for one week or for the rest of her life) was unlawfully and immorally detained" (243). Quite

significantly, Walsh confronts this excessive female condemnation by later rendering a resentful, wiser Anne Marie remind Eamon of his accountability: "I've been beaten, I've been shouted out, I've been told I'm filth...they took my life away. What we did was wrong, I accept that. But it was both of us. Tell me: why was your life worth protecting more than mine?" A similar case can be found in Kitty, a primary school teacher who refused to have a forced marriage with the father of her baby, or to use her own words, "simply because [she] said no". And other notable characters are Angela, the belle of the place, who was incarcerated there for being "temptation on legs"; Brida, the sparkling and romantic girl who dreams about her illegitimate baby being adopted by an American family and becoming a film star; and finally, Sister Bernadette, who appears as the severe and ruthless religious figure that endorses the girls' compliance with the convent rules of silence, work and contrition. Arguably, this array of institutionalised women reflects the manifold rationale upon which the strict regulatory norms of female sexuality were predicated inside the laundries.

For the analysis of the complex scenario of corporeal repression that permeates both the novel and the film, it is useful to examine the ideas discussed by Ariel Glucklich in *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (2001). An interesting point in his study is the conflation of corporeal pain with redemption that has characterised different religious traditions across the world, as well as the intersection of the notions of violence, culture and power. In many religious practices, including the Catholic, pain is understood as punishment but also as a transformative element for the spirit and the mind. For Glucklich, the hurting subject usually correlates with a cultural context so that "[t]he task of sacred pain is to transform destructive or disintegrative suffering into a positive religious-psychological mechanism for reintegration within a more deeply valued level of reality than individual existence" (6). This approach to the culture-subject binary and the psychological transformations that result from the various forms of regulated sacred pain reverberates in the complex order in which violence is inflicted upon the Magdalenes, whose bodies can be understood then as the utmost recipients of cultural power. Indeed, most survivors' accounts and artistic representations of the laundries have insisted on the fact that, as the guarantors of Catholic morality, the nuns and the clerical figures imposed their system of beliefs over the inmates not only by physical maltreatment[5] but also through psychological harassment, in a clear example of what Glucklich calls "punitive-educational pain" (21).

[5] The issue of physical violence has been a quite controversial one because the Church and the State have overlooked this practice, contrary to most survivors' testimonies, as illustrated in several documentaries and the report of "State Involvement in the Magdalene Laundries" issued by Justice for Magdalenes in September 2012. The official disregard was evident in the results of the recent so-called McAleese Report, issued in February 2013, which officially stated the occurrence of psychological intimidation but did not fully admit physical maltreatment by the religious figures. The report and many social debates that emerged in its aftermath, however, led to a formal State apology to the Magdalene survivors and their families.

Disciplinary practices surface over the course of the second part of Conlon-McKenna's novel, which concentrates on the institutionalised experiences of the protagonist and the other Magdalenes she meets in the Dublin laundry. Progressively, we follow the evolution from Esther's initially innocent response to the system, to her more thoughtful analysis of the routine within the home. One of her earliest encounters with the tyrannical regime takes place when one of the nuns, Sister Vincent, violently cuts Esther's hair, a common practice reported by former inmates and broadly criticised for the humiliation, dehumanisation and desexualisation that it entailed. The effects become evident in the following excerpt:

> Ignoring her protests, the bloody old bitch of a nun dosed her hair with a foul-smelling liquid. [...] Taking her scissors, the nun began to clip away at her light brown curls till her hair barely reached beyond her ears. [...] Esther tried to mask her shame and anger until she reached the upstairs dormitory. Tears welled in her eyes when she caught a glimpse of herself in the cracked mirror in the corner near the wardrobe. She looked awful, almost as bad as she felt. Her dampened hair hung straight and limp; her eyes were huge and lost in her pasty face; the unflattering overall shift dress was geared to accommodate expanding waistlines and bulges, the dirty blue colour making her look even paler. Already, she looked just the same as the rest of them.[6] (213-15)

Shortly thereafter, the reality of the laundry begins to dawn upon Esther, who observes how "[t]he women worked so hard, it was as if they were being punished. It was bloody awful work too, with arms and legs and backs aching, standing in suds and water, eyes stinging from the bleach" (219). Indeed, it is this type of descriptions of the Magdalene reality that seems to justify their identification as "the Irish gulags for women", as Sam Jordison has called them (2007). To this interpretation must be added that throughout the novel, Esther and the other inmates display the continuing terrorisation that hovered over them, as any breach of the rules meant a severe castigation. Quite illustrative in this respect is the case of Saranne, a sixteen-year old orphan who was accused of having helped another Magdalene to access the annexed orphanage where her baby had been placed. Saranne is "strapped" by Sister Gabriel, and the narrator emphasises how "her livid red hands, wide welts of bruised torn skin covered her palms. They were too sore for her to bend or use" (333). Soon after, we learn about the nun's reaction as she was "determined to come down hard on the penitents. They deserved no trust or understanding. She had a vindictive streak, and had Saranne's hair shorn close to her scalp, making an example of her.

[6] The erasure of individuality was concomitant to this ritual, which strongly affected the Magdalenes' psyche for years. A common thread among many cultural products has been precisely the recovery of these women's identity, as clearly claimed in Mannix Flynn's artistic installation "Call Me by My Name". Also, the last sequence in Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* shows one of the protagonists, whose hair had been violently cut by a nun as a punishment for her misbehavior, proudly bragging her long hair after having escaped from the laundry.

Saranne looked like a small scared skeleton, her bruised hands constantly touching her almost bare skull" (335).

In the film, punitive violence also recurs, and it has an equally brutal character. In various scenes we see several Magdalenes with shaved hair, which noticeably demonstrates the director's intention to highlight the incidence of this practice, as evidenced by survivors and former nuns. However, it is through Kitty that corporeal terror is most elaborately articulated, because being a talented and educated woman, she is constantly reminded that she should understand "the meaning of discipline", so when disobeying the rules, she receives the fiercest castigation: Sister Bernardette flogs her when Kitty is caught talking to the rest of the girls while washing the sheets, and she is also harshly beaten when the nuns find out that in an attempt to escape the laundry, she had been offering her sexual favours to Patrick, one of the police officers that regularly visited the institution. Likewise, corporeal violence is the immediate scolding that Anne Marie gets when the guards take her back to the laundry after having run away with her new-born baby to the village nearby. Although the beating is not directly filmed, the camera concentrates on an injured Anne Marie, with various wounds on her face and her hair chopped irregularly, and an intimidating Sister Bernadette, in what seems the climax of bodily aggression and verbal degradation on the part of the nun: "Shall I tell you what I see? I see ugliness, wantonness, corrupt and defiled flesh. An abomination of God's holy will". Embedded in this scene are most of the gender, religious and cultural elements of corporeal repression discussed so far in this study, shedding some light, through Walsh's interpretation, on the radicalisation of religious indoctrination through the body of the (M)other.

The use of violence and the implementation of pain in the two texts can also be read in terms of Foucault's notion of visibility and the disciplined body outlined in his study *The Birth of the Prison* (1975). He argues that "at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared; the tortured body was avoided; the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment" (14). The idea of spectacle then adds to the other aspects of the body analysed in this chapter insofar as it seems to inform the methods of educational punishment that are deployed in the laundries. The context is by no means similar to the ones described by Foucault, but as he also observes, "the practice of the public execution haunted our penal system for a long time and still haunts it today" (14-15). It is the durability of this system and the intersection between corporeal pain and visibility that, I believe, correlate with the context in which the Magdalene bodies were disciplined. For Foucault,

> The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as right and as property. The body, according to this penalty, is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions. Physical pain, the pain of the body itself, is no longer the constituent element of the penalty. From being an art of unbearable sensations punishment has become an economy of suspended rights. (11)

This passage speaks directly to the situation of women interned in the laundries, where the haunting of a long-standing penalty system seems evident. A complex punishment order ruled over the Maggies, whose rights were totally "suspended" while the agents of power frequently performed individual violence in a kind of spectacle mode and with supposedly didactic purposes. Thus, the Magdalene disciplined body became not only the object of violence but also the mechanism through which further condemnation, on both an individual and group level, could be prevented.

Both in the novel and the film, Foucault's ideas of punitive spectacles acquire an even more significant dimension as the two texts highlight the cruelty inflicted upon a number of "penitents" at the moment of childbirth, when many of them were ruthlessly treated and severely injured as a result of an implicit need to atone for their sexual sins. This imposition of pain, which of course resonates with Eve's fall, also brings to mind what Glucklich calls "the juridical model of pain" (16). For him, "[t]his constitutional sentiment, if taken seriously, situates the pain of parturition in a moral universe in which pain is not meaningless, or even merely biological. It is the automatic moral consequence in an iron logic of action and reward" (16). In *The Magdalen,* Esther's childbirth takes place quite smoothly and it certainly figures as a happy experience for the protagonist, but in the narration of this event there are certain elements that actually indicate a redundant repression and victimisation of the Magdalene body. Esther had anticipated the moment as one of the "horror stories about childbirth" that she had heard from the Maggies (231). Indeed, when taken to the mother-and-baby annex, we hear that she felt "mortified" by Sister Bridget's treatment during her labour, mostly when the nun tries to administer an enema against her will, to what she concludes: "They were trying to torture her, that's what it was!" (341). Remarkably, too, another inherent dimension of this conception of forced pain is the manifest supremacy of the nun that prevails over the competence of the midwife, whose presence seems to be merely symbolic, as she only participates in the delivery to "attend to the afterbirth" (343).

In *Sinners*, the director features a very enlightening childbirth scene that encapsulates many of the constructions and complexities that we have just mentioned in relation to the novel, but which are predicated in a more engaging way. Although the nuns commonly reproved close friendships among the Magdalenes (Finnegan 29), when Kitty's labour starts Margaret is exceptionally allowed in the maternity ward. Then, the intern nurse, Nuala, is called for in order to attend to the delivery but as in the case of Conlon-McKenna's novel, the inflexible orders of Sister Bernadette immediately invalidate Nuala's medical expertise and complicity with the Magdalene. In this scene, Walsh keenly depicts the different levels of power and the two distinct positions represented by the nun and the nurse, whose attitudes towards Kitty stand for women-centered and patriarchy-oriented handlings of labour, respectively. The moment constitutes, to my mind, an open critique of the extreme exertion of hegemonic power over female corporeality and it illustrates women's claim to have full control of their bodies, which has been on the feminist agenda for a long time, mostly as far as parturition is concerned. In this light, the conditions in which Kitty's childbirth takes place can be interpreted in terms of

Naomi Wolf's account of contemporary approaches to the pregnant body and the handling of labour in her book *Misconceptions.* Wolf delves into the wrong expectations and the invasive treatment of women's bodies during pregnancy and childbirth, and she denounces how "birth has become too pathologized". For her,

> Obstetricians justify a high degree of medical interventions in part because they see almost all circumstances of birth as pathological. Midwives object to classifying all births as "low risk" or "high risk", for example —a categorizing system that does little to help women, no matter how healthy, think of birth as "part of their wellness cycle", as midwives like to say, and something that they can manage with confidence. Midwives argue that birth is best treated as a normal and healthy process —that women as rule, are capable of giving birth without undue interventions. Many midwives believe that the way doctors have medicalized normal births leaves women less able to call up the confidence and courage they need to get themselves through birth without drastic intervention. (128)

The representation of childbirth in the film takes an interesting expression when seen through the lens of Wolf's ideas, as in this case invasion occurs clearly: not only is the midwife's role limited but also, and most significantly, pathologisation leads to criminalisation. Strictly speaking, Kitty's parturition is not medicalised, but as a representative of the law of the Father, it is the nun who clearly controls the event, as in Conlon-McKenna's novel. In the film, Walsh renders a watchful Sister Bernadette monitor the delivery throughout, while she declines the administration of any pain relief and verbally terrorises Kitty by reminding her of her fall, questioning her teaching abilities and reinforcing her need to do penance for her sins. The "undue intervention" of the nun, to use Wolf's words, appears at its outmost form when she ruthlessly insists to Kitty that death would be the only expected merit of her past wrongdoings.

Once the baby is born, the domineering attitude of the nun in the labour ward continues, as she refuses to allow the nurse to give Kitty stitches after her bad tear during childbirth. The recurrence of this practice is confirmed by June Goulding, a former midwife in Bessboro Mother and Baby Home, in her book *The Light in the Window*, which is based on her experiences in that institution. She remarks that it was understood that the girls had to go through pain and put up with the discomfort of being torn, as they had to atone for their sins (31). This imposed agony resulted in most of the cases into what Goulding describes as "excruciating labour" (33), also adding to the nuns' common refusal to administer any kind of analgesics, and to the other elements of punishment mentioned above.[7] Such understanding of

[7] In a further elaboration of her witnessing of Magdalenes' incarceration and pain, Goulding also comments: "The girls were treated like criminals in this building and there was a general air of penitence. It permeated every corner —even the chapel. Those in charge who ran the godforsaken place like a prison did so as cruelly and as uncaringly as any medieval gaoler. [...] Mother and child were alone and together for at least ten days, at most three loved-packed years until the final and inevitable parting forever —*amputation without anaesthetic*" (1998: 42, emphasis added).

pain, typical of the Catholic doctrine, echo again the ideas discussed by Glucklick, who observes that "pain can be the solution to suffering, a psychological analgesic that removes anxiety, guilt, and even depression" (11). The custom illustrates quite clearly his idea of the juridical model of pain insofar it is understood as "a debt or damages owed" (16).

Also, the representation of the pregnant Magdalene body in the two texts bears out Julia Kristeva's ideas about abjection in very interesting ways. In *Powers of Horror*, she pointed out that the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Consequently, in order to achieve national identity societies tend to reject and contain abjection insofar as it threatens its symbolic order. In Kristevan theory, defiled and fuzzy elements, like corpses, excrement or blood, blur the limits of a normative society, displaying its fragility and corruption. The problem lies in the fact that the abject is always present, so that it constantly jeopardises identity for individuals and nations, which try to separate from it. For Kristeva too, maternity and femininity have been elements against which cultural, religious and national identity has been constructed: "That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (70). In this light, the notion of the abject perfectly applies to the Magdalenes, who have historically experienced various forms of abjection/suppression on account of their "disturbing" condition, as described above. More particularly, I believe that the Magdalene body in labour epitomises Kristeva's ideas on the blurring of corporeal limits, as well as the disruption of cultural borders and the nation's attempt to control social anxiety.

Most aspects of Kristeva's theory of the abject can be said to materialise in the scene of Kitty's childbirth, especially in its last part, when right after the delivery Sister Bernadette asks Margaret to put out for the pigs a bucket with a mixture of amniotic liquid, the umbilical cord and the placenta. The fluids in the bucket, which Walsh emphasises with a camera close-up, figure as a perfect example of the abject: they blur the body's boundaries, and disturb the system order, not only by being female fluids but also, and most importantly, for the institutionalised context of defilement in which they were produced. This interpretation also coalesces with Luce Irigaray's denunciation of the lack of representation of female fluids, as made clear in her study *This Sex Which Is Not One*. For Irigaray, the traditional absence of representations of female corporeal fluidity has to do with the prevailing associations between solidity and rationality, whereas, she remarks, "fluids have never stopped arguing" against that relationship (113). Similarly, in "Stabat Mater" Kristeva also reclaims what she calls "the semiotic maternal body", that is, the linguistic expression of the body of the mother, which has been traditionally repressed by the Catholic dogma of the virginal maternity of the Virgin Mary (143).

In order to counteract this recurrent victimisation, Walsh and Conlon-McKenna emphasise women's corporeal force by featuring one of the most sordid aspects of transgressive female sexuality, and they focus instead on the liberating effects of its fluidity. For that reason, their choice becomes a spectacle that not only defies the punitive corporeal acts effected upon the Magdalenes, in the Foucauldian disciplinary mode, but also pinpoints a decisive aspect of these women's experiences

that must be openly exposed. Thus, with their representation of the institutionalised female body in its outmost abjected form, Conlon McKenna and Walsh fill the traditional gap of artistic discourse about childbirth, which was also claimed by the French philosopher, while suggesting that the victimised female body needs to be brought to a broad public space of representation, analysis and critique. Indeed, as Jennifer Jeffers points out, "it is the body —or contestation of the body— that is at the heart of the Christian religion, important to societal regulation, and precisely the recipient of violence, punishment, and incarceration in Ireland. It is the body in the Irish consciousness that first and foremost needs to be interrogated" (29). A similar point has been made by Heather Ingman when she notes that in the "hypermasculinized Irish nationalism, maternal subjectivity featured as the abject, that which had to be suppressed in order for identity to form" (75). In that sense, the two texts propose a return to the material or matter, echoing the postulates of Judith Butler considered above.

Indeed, in *Sinners*, female sexual repression of the Magdalenes acquires a deeper and tragic meaning through Kitty. Patrick's promises of a life together outside the laundry raise her hopes for some time, but the prospect of marrying a Magdalene, with all the prejudices of their sexual looseness that circulated in the community, results in Patrick's final refusal. As a consequence, and shortly after her baby is given up for adoption, Kitty commits suicide by falling off the stairs in the laundry courtyard. In this terrible scene, her body, or more precisely her corpse, becomes again the abject, not only for its visual impact upon Patrick and the other Maggies, but also because for cultural identity to prevail, it has to be "covered" as a "terrible and unfortunate accident", as Sister Bernadette asks the policeman to report it right afterwards. Again, this scene reworks Kristeva's views of the abject, particularly in reference to the corpse, which for her, "seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (*Powers of Horror* 4). In this case, and understood within the context of the Irish cultural and Catholic grounds described above, the suicidal Magdalene corpse represents the paramount expression of abjection and corruption, from which society and its agents of power, figured in the microcosm of the laundry, need to detach in order to perpetuate their core identity. To counteract such debasement, Kristeva also claims that repudiated elements should not be expelled or silenced as they are necessary for the complete social validation of the individual. Under those circumstances, the abject must be spoken through sublimated activities, in which Kristeva includes the production of art, literature or psychology and sexuality, and this is precisely what is accomplished by the director. In other words, the therapeutic speaking of the abject is carried out through the film, and, by foregrounding the corpse of a Magdalene, Walsh seems to be claiming that, contrary to the accepted rule of silence about Magdalene corporeality, it is necessary to depict all its details, to make it a spectacle and therefore, an element of resistance, because being the abject, it draws attention to the fragility of the social order upon which its defilement has been constructed.

4. CONCLUSIONS

A close reading of *The Magdalen* and *Sinners* in terms of corporeal discipline has shed some light upon the durability of a system of punishment that is detrimental to women and has lingered well into the twentieth century in Ireland. From different artistic genres, the two texts emphasise the same practices of corrective pain within the laundries, which became part of the officially sanctioned apparatus of moral rectification. However, with the stories told in both productions, we are acquainted with the fact that with their particular focus on women considered sexually disruptive, these institutions typified the prejudiced treatment of deviance and the gender-biased character of such an attempt. The issue of corporeal punishment has been a rather contentious one when it comes to the intersection of religious doctrine and individual performance. In the two productions, this clash is encapsulated by the different modes of corporeal discipline upon the Magdalenes, usually carried out for the sake of moral learning, but also widely misconstrued on more general, excessive and wicked interpretations of the atonement of the Magdalene other. With my analysis, I have tried to provide a fuller understanding of how Conlon-McKenna and Walsh articulate the Magdalenes' embodied experience of pain in what was, essentially, a cruel enactment of social performance over the material individual body, as denounced by Butler, Ingman, Wolf and most of the critics that have been mentioned above. To counterweigh that widespread norm, both the novelist and the director offer artistic representations of some of its most hidden particulars while demanding more subjective and individual-centered expressions of this infamous chapter of Ireland's history. Hence, they can certainly be said to have set the agenda for the display of the actual corporeal bodies of the Magdalenes that has been taking place in Ireland in most recent times.

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